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AND IN THE HUMAN HEART

## ALSO BY CONRAD AIKEN

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# AND IN THE HUMAN HEART

CONRAD AIKEN



S T A P L E S P R E S S

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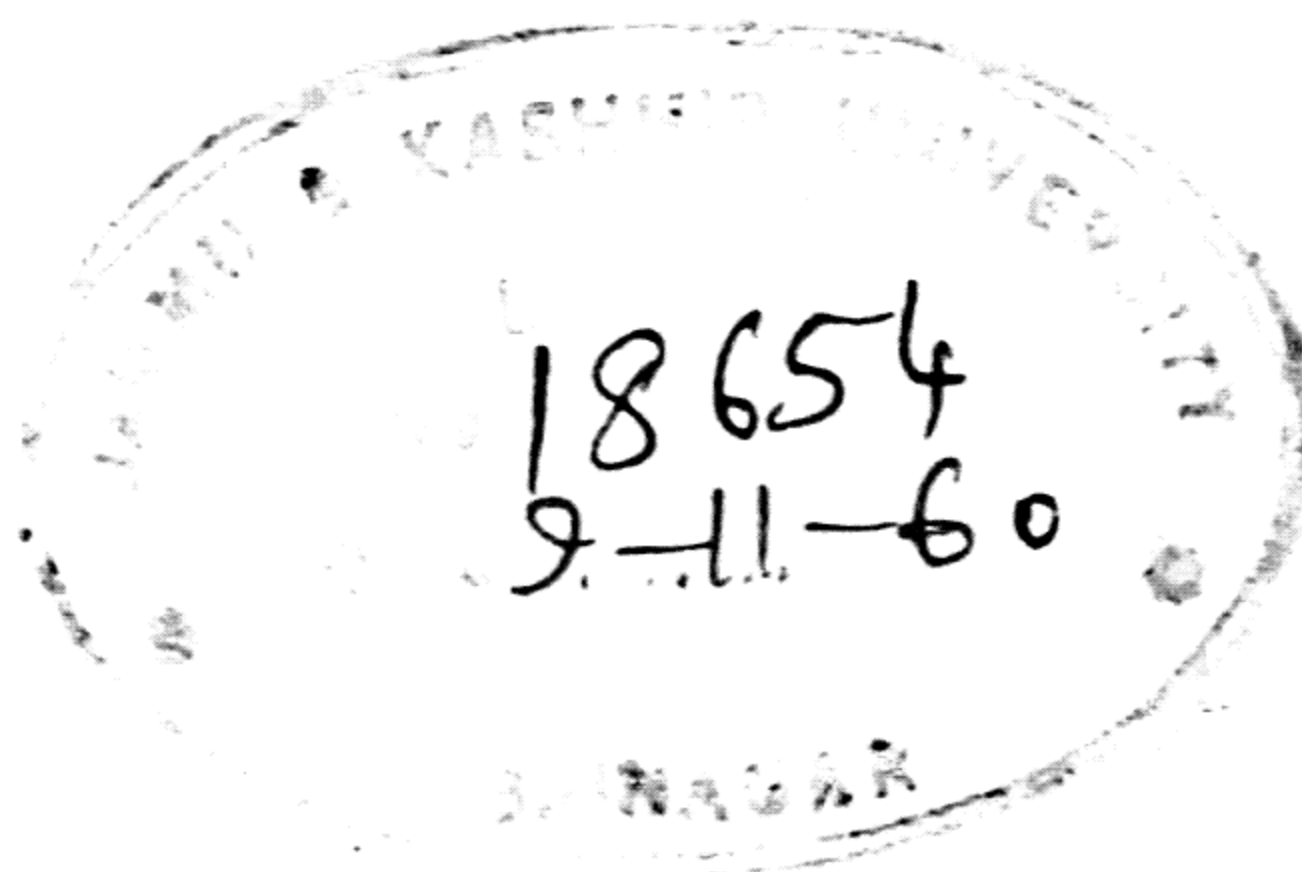
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*This book for*  
HELEN LATHROP LINSCOTT  
*who had she lived*  
*would have been its kindest critic*

*I have read*

*Time in the rock and in the human heart,  
Space in the bloodstream, and those lesser works  
Written by rose and windflower on the summer, sung  
By water and snow, deciphered by the eye,  
Translated by the slaves of memory,  
And all that you be you, and I be I,  
Or all that by imagination, aping  
God, the supreme poet of despair,  
I may be you, you me, before our time  
Knowing the rank intolerable taste of death,  
And walking dead on the still living earth.*

AND IN THE HUMAN HEART

I

Bend as the bow bends, and let fly the shaft,  
the strong cord loose its word as light as flame;  
speak without cunning, love, as without craft,  
careless of answer, as of shame or blame:  
this to be known, that love is love, despite  
knowledge or ignorance, truth, untruth, despair;  
careless of all things, if that love be bright,  
careless of hate and fate, careless of care.  
Spring the word as it must, the leaf or flower  
broken or bruised, yet let it, broken, speak  
of time transcending this too transient hour,  
and space that finds the beating heart too weak:  
thus, and thus only, will our tempest come  
by continents of snow to find a home.

# II

As salvage is too slow, and dives too deep,  
and brings to light too little, at such length,  
a coin or two at most, where fortunes sleep,  
a golden ingot for that iron strength,  
so is this parsimoniousness of love  
which wastes a life of care for relics lost,  
neglects a golden sunrise, here above,  
for sunken summers, gone, nor counts the cost.  
Break the poor pattern that would count and  
    scheme;  
add web to web; or, spider-like, devise  
the slow-encroaching all-embracing dream,  
a golden universe of golden flies:  
let the one thing be one and one alone—  
the hand fling once, once only, and one stone.



III

Then winter will speak well for you, as spring;  
darkness will chide the brightness down, and tell  
such wonders as no migrant bird could sing;  
and timelessness itself will be a bell  
to end all skeins and schemes and schisms of time,  
and lovelessness, translated, will be song;  
hatred and ice will not escape that rhyme,  
the right will flaunt the plumage of the wrong.  
Fear will be fear, still, but his stars how good—  
such as will guide lost mariners aright—  
the frost and felspar be your holy food,  
and journey's end the all-benignant night.  
If love can do such things, and more, for us,  
what can we be, love, if not generous?

# IV

And this, your hand, is but an easy measure  
of such wide wealths of space as beggar counting,  
a summer summed up in a moment's pleasure,  
touch, and a touch again, the total mounting  
beyond compute, beyond compare, each finger  
the planet's easy pace from time to terror:  
chaos, within this palm, finds time to linger,  
and, without recompense, work out his error.  
Touch, and a touch again—each fingernail  
is mooned and starred, in each a cosmos turns:  
there the defeated and exhausted fail;  
there in his holy fire the martyr burns;  
and there, in ecstasy, the god makes bright  
his own projected and applauding night.

V

As on a stage the backdrop makes the scene –  
the light or bright, against which dark is shown;  
or the black nothingness, the world-between,  
whereon false cycloramic stars are thrown:  
that emptiness, that space, for which the action  
is a brief foreplay, and of small importance:  
poor trifles, as of fiction, passion, faction,  
before the indifferent hand lets fall the curtains –  
so must our love be, love – a candle raised  
against the darkness of divine neglect;  
only against that void can be appraised  
sureness of heart, or the heart's intellect;  
yes will be yes a thousandfold; the kiss  
a flower brought back broken from the abyss.

VI

This body must my only altar make;  
there will I burn the miracle, and there  
the bread and wine of strict communion take,  
beating my heart as a deliberate prayer.  
There the pure knowledge, and the only, hymns  
of the divine and only Known-Unknown:  
*O Altitudo* in the bloodstream swims,  
the god of love sings in the very bone.  
Here is your praise, and all of it; what more  
has this sacrarium of flesh to offer?  
A whisper in the brain, yet, like a shore,  
wide as the sea, with all the sea can proffer:  
a mystery, confined in little space:  
the whole world's wonder in a single face.



VII

VII

And search the senses—ah, but not too well!  
To search the senses is to search the roots,  
and the dark-loving knowledge needs its hell  
to send the simple bough its simple fruits.  
Not search them, no: but let them windows be  
for the unsifted and untroubled light—  
the great choir flooded by infinity,  
the holy body like a fane made bright.  
In such a light, our knowledges will meet,  
nimble than light itself, cunning as air;  
our worlds, conjoined, beat with the same wingbeat,  
and that divine vibration everywhere;  
the body, cruciform, by godhead stilled,  
like a poor church with golden rumor filled.

VIII



IX



X

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If we must speak, then let us humbly speak;  
humbly becomes the great, and great we are;  
ice is the silent language of the peak;  
and fire the silent language of the star;  
the sun is silent, the moon silent, too—  
only the wind gives voice to ice or flame;  
let us be modest, then, of I and You,  
and give them back the hugeness whence they came.  
Shadow to you, the subtle—light to me,  
the nimble—and the twilight soul between,  
in which, embracing, we may learn to be,  
and having learned to be, may learn to mean;  
then we shall speak, as the moon speaks, with snow,  
our words already frozen, long ago.



XI

Blue, blue, and blue again, and blue once more,  
the autumn breaks on the unbroken sea –  
the blue sea breaks on the unbroken shore,  
yet without breaking, ringed infinity –  
blue, blue, and blue again, and blue once more,  
wide as this orchard is, and wider yet –  
wide as this kingdom, whose reverberant shore  
is all about by clanging seas beset –  
blue, blue, and blue again, and bluer still,  
all-overarching heaven, fierce dome of azure,  
which can outstare the eagle's eye, or kill  
the intemperate heart that vaunts too much its  
    pleasure:  
this is our color, love, for it is fate;  
and we will match with love that deathless hate.

XII

XII

Time ticks, time flows, time runs, time pours his  
sand,  
time blows, his stellar flute, and with each note  
touches, and so dismisses, with sure hand,  
love that was precious in the blackbird's throat—  
and life, more precious in the blackbird's heart,  
and still more precious in his sweetheart's breast—  
time, as indifferent to the blackbird's art  
as to the orphaned fledglings in the nest.  
Yet in this wrist that I hold out is time;  
his murder here, as in your cheek; and you,  
alas, my love, embody too his crime,  
to whom alone you will at last be true.  
Father am I of all then—you the mother;  
for we embrace time who embrace each other.

XIII

And if we kiss, remember too how time  
so many fools with flattering tongue has kissed—  
so many kings and kingdoms praised in rhyme,  
whose names no more now than the rhymes are  
missed.

What mountains has he not undone to dust!  
What rivers rendered into sea! What space  
not changed, obscured, and withered, with his lust,  
which, like a hot breath, blasts the beloved face!  
My love, what comfort in this dereliction,  
for us, who know the ruin which we build—  
we, the creative and created fiction,  
this fiction by ourselves both willed and killed—  
except to know, and in the knowing cherish,  
that we, the loved and loving, must both perish.

XIV





XV

Snowflake on asphodel, clear ice on rose,  
frost over thistledown, the instant death  
that speaks Time's judgment, turning verse to prose,  
or withering June to blackness in a breath—  
icicle, cheek by jowl with goldenrod,  
and on the purple aster silver rime,  
a web of death, bright as the web of god,  
spun on these simple themes and schemes by time:  
snowflake on asphodel—how clear, how bright  
the blue burns through the melting star! how brave  
the dying flower, and the snow how light  
that on the dying flower makes his grave!  
Snow's death on dying flower, yet both immortal—  
love, these are you and I—enter this portal.

XVI

XVI

But these are greater names. The humbler, too,  
shall suit as well: the twisted morning-glory,  
its tender tip wet with the morning dew;  
or the harsh plantain leaf; these tell our story.  
Humble and good, are these – dog mercury  
of pure simplicity and furtive blossom,  
burdock and bindweed and good fumitory,  
tansy and thyme, wild carrot's bleeding bosom –  
and dandelion, the first and last of flowers,  
and pimpernel, that must so secret be,  
the small white clover, which is rightly ours,  
dear to the bee, dearest to you and me –  
in these our language speaks, outwitting doom;  
in these pure petals is our kingdom come.

XVII

XVII

As this: that I shall speak, being first to die,  
in all these worlds which we have known together,  
skylark in heaven, or the primrose eye,  
or the wild streams and strains of April weather;  
bugle of cock-crow at the daybreak blowing—  
how brave that cry in darkness, how forlorn!—  
these we have known together; these, still knowing,  
yourself alone must greet. The selfsame horn  
will sound its cheerful summons on that day  
when you alone must wake, and I alone  
begin the long sleep in my bed of clay,  
adding earth's simple sum of stone to stone.  
Yet, though I speak, and though you hear me speak,  
let not the dead heart, nor the living, break.

XVIII

XVIII

For brief as water falling will be death,  
and brief as flower falling, or a leaf;  
brief as the taking, and the giving, breath;  
thus natural, thus brief, my love, is grief.

Let this too fall, as all things fall, to earth—  
your grief with me be buried; let me be  
the grave of all things that with me had birth—  
sorrow and vanity be dead with me.

For our magnificence and kingdom is  
vaster than shoreless time or hourless space:  
here and forever blaze our histories  
in the once-known and unforgotten face:  
you, and the world, shall this bright ghost inherit:  
Love, the four-wingèd and inviolate spirit.



XIX

XIX

Time will dismiss such subject shapes as these:  
the thistledown, that flicks and clocks an hour;  
the clock, that ticks industrious obsequies,  
marking indifferent deaths of soul and flower;  
the leaf, that in its time will shrink and shrivel;  
the yes, that in its hour will be denied;  
the soul that seeks in evil its own level,  
as if for virtue none had ever died.

Time will dismiss such subject shapes as this:  
the water that must dry away to nothing;  
green fields laid waste in barren sand; the kiss  
given and taken to an end of loathing.

Time will dismiss? But love dismisses time,  
and knots him tightly in this love-knot rhyme.

XX

XX

Snowflake, snowflower, on plum and pear, wild  
apple  
shyest of trees, in shy and lovely blossom;  
Diana, in the sun-and-shadow dapple,  
blue eye, blue heaven, the half-glimpsed virgin  
bosom –  
almighty sun, how turn the flowers all  
humbly in little ranks their faces up,  
following in adoration till thy fall,  
each proffering to thy love his turning cup –  
turning as thou turnest, and the season turns,  
see how devout, in unison, they move,  
while in last blue delight the skylark burns  
and the rapt countryside hymns thee her love!  
Yes, and to thee we turn our faces, too,  
by thy rich lightning, like the year, made new.

XXI

Love, count the wildflowers on this golden bank—  
count all these branchèd and leaf-bearing stems,  
where, in the sun, a many-musicked rank,  
they wear their white and golden diadems—  
round as the sun 'is, as the moon is, round,  
bearing them proudly, with no genuflection,  
each with his starlike shadow, his own ground,  
how still they stand, and yet still keep direction—!  
Moon-dial or sun-dial could no truer tell  
outrageous majesty of tide or hour:  
the god's great violent heart beats in this bell;  
eternity spreads time-rings in this flower:  
and you, your hands among the blossoms counting,  
are but another time and measure mounting.

XXII

XXII

And how dismember or dishevel this,  
dissever item from atom, shred apart  
angelic instancies that build the kiss,  
dissimilate the accents of the heart,  
break leaf from branch, or bough from bole, or bole  
from root—distrain, or levy a distress,  
on the poor minutes that compound a soul—  
save for disaster, and to dispossess?  
Ah, but not so. The kiss tastes bitter best  
when it is solved, or partly, in despair:  
nowhere shall love's head rest upon love's breast  
so deeply, or so mercifully, as where  
that agony of counting, lost in numbers,  
worships, despairs, and kisses— and then slumbers.



XXIII

XXIII

So, in the morning, when the east is strung  
with the bright harp-strings of another day:  
against whose glistening golden cords are sung  
all things that birds can sing or words can say:  
like a great page of music, whereto leaning  
even the dark trees with their cordage sing,  
each harbored bird and leaf with separate meaning,  
the world's innumerable words for every string:  
all things at praise or gaze, peach-bloom, oak-gall,  
the greasy cricket waking, the quick ant  
stepping in gold against that lightning, all  
turned in that sudden fire to adamant:  
so, as unnumbered, varied so as this,  
the unresumable world that sums our kiss.

XXIV

XXIV

The unresumable world that sums our kiss –  
my love, if we could all that fortune summon,  
which wastes its substance in the abstract “this”,  
or is dismissed as substance, or as common:  
what cousin said in April, or the rain  
washed from the morning; what the spider wrote  
in dusty gossamer on a sun-warmed pane,  
words that the sunset or the moonrise quote:  
filaments, fragments, fractions – such as fever  
can disarrange and disarray: the sum  
of loves unowned, disowned, yet loves forever,  
these that our bloodstream are, and kingdom come:  
these, the unnumbered, let us love and cherish;  
which, like ourselves, if not remembered, perish.

XXV

Single and double, treble and multiple,  
the flower-mouth simple, or else fanged and honied,  
snowflake and sun, of the same ichor full,  
each as the other poor, or richly moneyed –  
each with the same largesse, the immortal stream,  
divine, unknowable, never-to-be-ended treasure,  
the pouring texture that fulfills a dream,  
or blooms a world, or points a moment's pleasure:  
the flowermouth simple as a ring, and yet  
how ringed with terror too, its silent bell  
in the vast Nothing like a funnel set,  
engulfing vortex between heaven and hell:  
here is your hand, love, and the morning-glory;  
which, though they differ, tell the selfsame story.

XXVI

XXVI

Shape has no shape, nor will your thinking shape it,  
space has no confines, and no borders time;  
and yet, to think the abyss is to escape it,  
or fix that horror's margin in a rhyme;  
wind blows from heaven, the worlds from chaos  
pour,  
pour into chaos, gone again; the night  
foams on an emptiness that has no shore;  
and all infinity like leaves in flight—  
all flowing, passing, like the bloodstream, here,  
that shapes its whispered moment in your hand,  
shapes too the hand that holds this moment dear,  
itself already pouring into sand;  
yet, in the instant that we think it, will  
that chaos shape our kiss, and so be still.



XXVII

XXVII

How then the winged splendors round us tower!  
Ourselves enthroned amid a hushed dominion  
where rock and voice speak of the sesame hour,  
and time, like space, stoops to become our minion:  
angelic presences of fire and ice,  
the humbler presences of tick and mote,  
whisper of thunder to the oriole's voice,  
evening and morning in a single note.  
  
There past and future, for ourselves conjoined,  
are the vast vault that shadows our embrace;  
for us, that heavenly arch of stars was groined,  
god's waste and wreckage builded for your face:  
all things despised, dispersed, in us unite,  
and shape, a glory of the Infinite.

XXVIII

Green, green, and green again, and greener still,  
spring towards summer bends the immortal bow,  
and northward breaks the wave of daffodil,  
and northward breaks the wave of summer's snow:  
green, green, and green again, and greener yet,  
wide as this forest is, which counts its leaves,  
wide as this kingdom, in a green sea set,  
which round its shores perpetual blossom weaves –  
green, green, and green again, and green once more.  
the season finds its term – then greenest, even,  
when frost at twilight on the leaf lies hoar,  
and one cold star shines bright in greenest heaven:  
but love, like music, keeps no seasons ever;  
like music, too, once known is known forever.

[ 57 ]

XXIX

XXIX

How many clouds must wraith-like rise from ocean,  
shine and assemble towards the drag-net sun –  
how vast and slow, how subtle, all that motion,  
before the darkening, and the rain begun!

How many nights of rain to end this drouth,  
the dark sky laboring on earth's laboring breast!

How many kisses, love, to brim that mouth,  
and lead the goddess to her fruitful rest!

O southwest wind, bring back the rain, and bring  
propitious darkness to my love and me:  
though love no season knows, let this be spring,  
and in my shadow let her fruitful be.

Trefoil and cinquefoil shine on earth's bare bosom;  
this be our omen, that we too may blossom.

XXX

XXX

Sun-born and moon-born, sun-birth and moon-  
birth, we  
like the twinned stars were twinned, and twinned to  
dance,  
each in the other's flame, the Gemini,  
circling and changing for each change and chance:  
dame-light and swift, our steps divinely vary.  
yet never farther than each circle rings;  
thus to time's end we dance our alfridary,  
bringing to pass, and pace, predicted things.  
As the great Pto<sup>l</sup>emy, proud chronocrat,  
plumbed the Chaldean tables, drew his chart,  
set out his watery moon, marked this from that,  
the cabalistic housings of his heart,  
so we these names and numbers, all foreseeing,  
dance, like the day his weather, into being.



XXXI

XXXI

These items in our chronicle therefore set:  
first, the wide sunrise, and the idiot's stare,  
in the pale east one bright star loitering yet,  
thereto the rooftops leaning hard and bare;  
then, the strung sound of birdsong, and the east  
like a vast theater ablaze with light,  
the music louder, and the light increased,  
and the plucked sound of harpstrings bright and  
tight—  
the idiot's stare with golden wonder filled,  
grass then to shiver, stone and stream to glisten,  
the leaves, and the strung sound of birdsong, stilled,  
all the arched night turned back, and hushed, to  
listen;  
and then the heartbeat, and the dream—and then  
fanfare of cock-crow, and our sun again.

XXXII

These items, too, put down. The golden spokes  
whirl over heaven from the bright axletree,  
on that fierce rim a curlèd vapor smokes,  
and then the dazzling hub too swift to see –  
the clouds, like horses rayed and rifted, breaking  
unnumbered lightnings upward, the soft thunder  
rolled through the shadows and the curtains, waking  
all the earth's creeping kind for savage wonder.  
Dragons of sleep and dream mount up that air –  
these are our monsters and our demons, love –  
our angels, too. And we, already there,  
over the firmament to Nothing move;  
yet hear the fly buzz on the ceiling, too,  
and, with a handclasp, keep the I and You.

XXVIII

XXVIII

Yet, despite splendor, on the margin kept,  
as might the wildflowers be that fledge a stream,  
cowslip and blue flag, faithful while we slept,  
the pouring texture that fulfills a dream:  
your elbow touching mine; your iris flecked  
with knotted light, golden-and-amber stitches,  
like that with which the jewel-weed is checked,  
or purple flag with veined throat enriches;  
the ladybird, across your finger walking,  
who parts the spotted wing-case, shows a wing,  
as softly furls it back, while we are talking,  
then, like a jewel, sits upon your ring;  
these on the margin of our sunrise be,  
lest time be faceless in eternity.



As leaf from wood, the dream will grow from being;  
when the east opens, the eyes open too;  
when the night opens, then begins our seeing:  
we wake, we separate, for I and You,  
look back on night, and all by night confounded,  
all life, all love, all time; and then, reborn,  
rejoice to find our love by love surrounded,  
the same world waking to the selfsame horn –  
all to be loved anew, and with the loving  
shaped to our dream, ourselves too shaped  
therewith,  
the worlds-in-worlds, of dream and being, moving  
greatly together in a single myth:  
thus, with each step we measure towards the east,  
is the horizon of our love increased.



XXXV

High on those toppling balconies of cloud  
that eastward from the world to nothing lean,  
over starred Yggdrasill, the many-boughed,  
at daybreak to the world's end we have seen –  
upon those glittering terraces set foot  
where rainbow's foot was never softer set,  
nor the bright lightning's swift and fiery root,  
that dreamlike splits the golden parapet –  
topples, reforms – yet walk securely there,  
all the wide morning in one river spread,  
a dragon caught in daybreak's yellow hair,  
the stars like silver javelins downward shed –  
a phantom, gone, which we can see, and love,  
who on our firmament like godhead move.

XXXVI

XXXVI

Yet inward look as well, where bloodstream beats  
intolerable pain, and therein seek  
islands and kingdoms, source of frosts and heats,  
cancer and chaos; where the fissures reek,  
and time's slow drainage downward is to death,  
atom from atom dripping, drop from drop;  
a world, in the vast mystery of breath,  
upheld by breath, which when that stops must stop.  
Here, too, we steep our hands and hearts; and  
hence,  
as from the marigold of magnificent day,  
bring back, renewed and rich, magnificence,  
still the more sumptuous that it will not stay;  
here, too, our balconies, from which to see  
end and beginning, and the star-bearing tree.

XXXVII

Sunrise or moonrise, outward or inward, love  
bends as the dream bends to the curving wish,  
shapes to the trembling and tender shape above  
as to the dark world of his stream the fish,  
bends as the seed bends to the vault of shell,  
curves as the thought curves to the arch of mind,  
in heaven an angel and a fiend in hell,  
all things delighted in, all things divined –  
and see how heavenward on these notes that make  
a simple tune, as if by stepping-stones,  
the halcyon path to subtler airs we take,  
shedding like thistledown this flesh, these bones –  
and yet even there, in that diviner voice,  
hear the twinned “you” speak softly, and rejoice!

XXXVIII

Separate, we join; and joined, we separate,  
thus to rejoin once more, but bringing news –  
you, of the morning rose by heaven's gate,  
and I, from hell, the nightshade's poisonous dew –  
each with that separate knowledge, the twinned star  
hidden and secret in the hand, the heart,  
each day devotion brought of strange and far,  
each day, each morning, a new world to start.  
How without wonder can we wake, to see  
each in the other that unknown abyss –  
time winding backward to infinity,  
or at vast standstill in this touch, this kiss?  
Nor will that morning come which is not strange,  
who have, each day, such wonders to exchange.



XXXIX

XXXIX

Bird's eye or snake's eye, bright through leaves; the  
leaf  
inscribed by sun with an all-cryptic message;  
downflash of raindrop, no less slight and brief  
than these; or snake or bird in soundless passage;  
or as the cloud's rim, golden against the moon,  
golden and bronze, swimming like foam to vanish,  
fire-phosphor seethed on sand, and gone as soon  
immortal light to burnish or replenish;  
one secret shape of cloud; one look; one mark  
hurriedly notched on the all-hurrying sun;  
bird's eye and snake's eye seen; then instant dark;  
but not before the unplumbed world there known:  
how swiftly turn the pages of this book,  
whose secrets flash and vanish, even as we look!

XL

XL

Look! In your eyes, the image of a cloud  
thinly flecks the far-off blue, and moves  
slowly away, and gone – a ghost, a shroud,  
dispersed in heaven, and gone . . . Meanwhile,  
our loves  
stare round it, stare beyond it, there to see  
the multitudes of joy that choir this hour:  
handclasp and morning star, the secret glee  
that shapes a cheek, an eyebrow, or a flower:  
the brazen bee, and the seven-banded light  
that blades with bronze the oaktops – all at once  
blending and binding, the whole world grown  
bright,  
almost intolerably with joy the sun's:  
how rich, how good – and yet, how richer, even  
knowing all this, to watch that cloud cross heaven.

XLI

Here is life's handiwork – a page inscribed,  
the name, forgotten, in the title set –  
as if one said, The moonlit sky is ribbed  
with golden clouds which sky will soon forget:  
here too life's handiwork – a line corrected,  
the secret cypher in the margin noted –  
as if one said, The blue flag, when dissected,  
is many-marked, gold-veined, and crow's-foot-  
throated:  
and yet, anonymous – unknown alike  
he that in clouds his name on heaven wrote,  
and he whose pencil could so finely strike  
gold vein from purple in the blue flag's throat:  
my love, we too, like these, shall leave no name:  
but have, like them, in flower or heaven, our fame.

XLII

XLII

Yesterday was another world, that broke  
its leagues of furious space before our feet;  
yesterday was another word, that spoke  
magnificent chaos, where all meanings meet.  
Tomorrow has its furious leagues to come,  
all the dark shore where break the stars like foam;  
tomorrow's thunder speaks the word of doom  
under whose lightning we shall find a home.  
Gaily over the phantom bridge we climb  
from chaos past to chaos yet to be –  
mountains and rivers, spellbound in our rhyme,  
under our feet the empyrean sea –  
kingfisher souls, wind-borne, the wingèd race,  
whose flight shall knit together time and space.



XLIII

Whip up the horses of the Yes and No!  
Day ends, time hurries, we have worlds to see,  
our chariot be these winds of thought that blow  
magniloquent meanings betwixt you and me:  
if the void sunders downward, let us fall,  
nethermost whistling Nothing there to find –  
these but our nightmares, our own dragons, all,  
who through the chaos but extend the mind.  
Now shall our daybreaks hammered be of gold –  
of love our empire, who all things shall love:  
morning and evening are at hand, behold,  
and to one measure, by our blessing, move:  
all's here that is, or will be, or has been.  
Rejoice, my love, our histories begin!





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